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Pebble dialogue opens with wrong question

By KIMBERLY WILLIAMS

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Today, the Pebble Limited Partnership will unveil its latest round of tactics in its quest for North America's largest copper and gold mine, planned for the headwaters of Bristol Bay's prolific salmon fishery. It appears that by hiring The Keystone Center, PLP is doing little more than attempting to purchase social acceptance under the guise of public outreach. As noted by Keystone representative Dr. Todd Bryan, Keystone will kick off its dialogue process on the proposed Pebble mine with an independent panel titled "Responsible Large-Scale Mining: Global Perspectives."

Yet, while they tout the idea of dialogue process, their approach is flawed from the start. First, they are beginning with the wrong question. Rather than asking if a mine of this sort should be built in a place like Bristol Bay, Keystone is asking "how to build a mine in Bristol Bay?" If PLP and Keystone were truly interested in public dialogue and community mediation, then they would begin with the first question, not the latter one.

The question for discussion here should not focus on whether it might theoretically be possible to build a "responsible mine" in Bristol Bay. The issue with Pebble is that it creates risks to the prolific salmon fishery of Bristol Bay and the communities that depend upon those resources. As we have seen before from other industries, risks exist and, whether intended or not, accidents happen. Take the Gulf oil spill as an example. More concerning, however, is the reality that if PLP were truly interested in responsible mining, they wouldn't have violated water use permits more than 45 times throughout their exploration process.

While PLP claims they have no mine plan in place to oppose, given what PLP presents to their stakeholders, this mine would seek to extract minerals from more than 10 billion tons of earth and would require the construction of some of the largest dams on earth to hold back the tailings. One doesn't need a "plan" to understand the dynamics of mining low grade ore in one of the wettest, most seismically active areas of Alaska, to understand that there are significant potential risks associated with a project of this scale -- risks that, in the event of dam failure or water contamination, would be difficult if not impossible to mitigate.

Those risks are not worth taking in a location that annually returns more than 40 million salmon, provides thousands of jobs and supports the subsistence livelihoods of thousands of Alaska Natives. For my family, descendants of Alaska Native people who have lived in Bristol Bay for more than 8,000 years, it means an unacceptable risk to our culture and way of life. Like so many Alaska Native families, three generations of families work side by side to harvest renewable resources, salmon, that we count on year after year.

Through the Keystone process, PLP is attempting to create a public dialogue around their project. However, if PLP were interested in public dialogue, they would note that various surveys by a range of polling agencies underscore that the vast majority of Bristol Bay residents are opposed to Pebble or any

other large-scale mine in their watershed.

In the end, while the topic of discussion today is "responsible mining," mining is by definition not "responsible" when it endangers irreplaceable renewable resources and ignores the desires of the communities that depend upon those resources. Therefore, don't buy the hype that PLP, through Keystone, is reaching out to the public to assess all options regarding their proposed mine. There are indeed some places where mining and fisheries cannot, despite best intentions, coexist. Bristol Bay is one of those places.

Kimberly Williams is the current executive director of Nunamta Aulukestai, a group representing eight Native village corporations. She lives in Dillingham with her husband and children. The Keystone Center panel will run from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. today in Room 307 at the UAA Consortium Library. Those who want to attend may register online at www.keystone.org, where live video of the panel also will be available.

Read more: <http://www.adn.com/2010/12/02/1585199/pebble-dialogue-opens-with-wrong.html#ixzz174x95kMu>